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The spoils of victory -- an early work day

By John Fritze

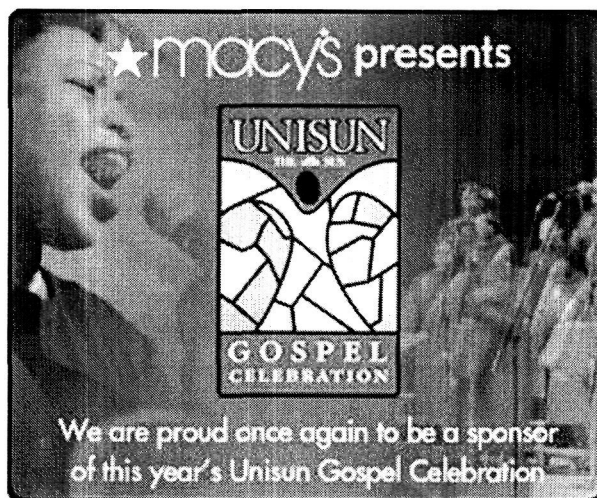
Sun reporter

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Hours after the polls closed and the victory speeches were over, Mayor Sheila Dixon and City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake came to City Hall, slightly bleary eyed, for a weekly, early-morning meeting where the nitty-gritty of the city's business gets done.

Entering the room to applause yesterday, they took their seats on the Board of Estimates and began to approve items on a 117-page agenda, including a tax break for the proposed Legg Mason headquarters and a plan to provide backup power for an emergency communications antenna on top of the Bromo Seltzer Tower.

"I'm going to put every ounce of what I have inside of me into this job," Dixon said later at a news conference that drew members of her senior staff. "I've made a commitment ... to work with every neighborhood in this city to continue to strengthen where we're weak and to continue to build where we're strong."



A day after city voters in the Democratic primary election chose to keep Dixon and Rawlings-Blake in place -- a move that put black women into the city's four most-prominent elected positions -- the two got started on a four-year term that could prove to be among the most challenging periods in Baltimore's history.

After a summer-long race that focused largely on crime and education, Dixon defeated City Councilman Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr. and five other candidates. Rawlings-Blake, meanwhile, beat community activist Michael Sarbanes in a race that many predicted would be close but that was apparently decided by more than 8,600 votes, according to unofficial results Tuesday night.

Dixon and Rawlings-Blake face challenges in the Nov. 6 general election. Technically, they are just the Democratic nominees. But given that nearly 80 percent of voters in Baltimore are registered as Democrats -- the last time the city elected a Republican mayor was in 1963 -- the general election challengers face an uphill battle.

One of the most important decisions Dixon's administration will make is to choose a police commissioner. Frederick H. Bealefeld III has been acting commissioner since Dixon asked his predecessor, Leonard D. Hamm, to step down in July. Dixon said yesterday that she will select a commissioner soon, but she did not offer a timeline.

Baltimore has had about a 12 percent increase in homicides over the same period last year, and violent crime became a major issue during the mayoral campaign.

Dixon, who received about 63 percent of the vote Tuesday, said that all department heads -- many of whom are from Gov. Martin O'Malley's mayoral administration -- must interview for their positions. She said that in some cases, she will also be interviewing other candidates for the jobs.

"There will be some changes," Dixon said when asked yesterday about her Cabinet. "Where and who, I'm not going to discuss that now, but everyone will interview for their jobs. I'm expecting a lot."

The administration is also expected to make news on a plan to reduce property taxes -- which are higher in Baltimore than any other jurisdiction in the state. Dixon convened a panel in February to study ways to reduce the property tax rate -- which is the single-largest source of revenue for the city -- and that group is expected to present a report to the mayor this month.

Dixon aides have said the administration hopes to reduce the property tax rate by 25 percent. It is not known how quickly that reduction would come or what other taxes or fees might be increased to offset the loss of revenue from a property tax reduction.

The city's tax rate is \$2.268 per \$100 of assessed value. The next highest rate, in Baltimore County, is \$1.10 per \$100 of value. Some believe that because Baltimore's tax rate is so much higher than surrounding jurisdictions, it discourages families and businesses from locating in city.

"We're going to give the mayor and the council some recommendations that, if adopted, could reduce the tax rate at a more rapid pace," said Joseph T. "Jody" Landers III, executive vice president of the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors and a former councilman, who co-chairs the panel. "We're in a good position, but this is not going to happen without a clear strategy and a clear plan."

Dixon also reiterated a plan she has talked about for several months to develop a land bank, a concept that has been used by other cities and states to sell government-owned vacant property. Generally, the arrangement allows for an independent organization, such as a nonprofit group, to buy, maintain and sell property.

She also talked about stepping up efforts by the city's housing department to develop neighborhoods such as Oliver and Poppleton.

Donald F. Norris, professor and chair of the department of public policy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, said Dixon has considerably more power now that she is no longer staring down the barrel of this year's election.

"Before, she had to be worried about September. Now, she doesn't have to worry for another three years. It makes a world of difference in what she can do," he said. "Now that she has the real job, rather than the interim job, it is very empowering."

Dixon, the former City Council president, became mayor Jan. 17 when O'Malley was sworn in as governor. At that time, Rawlings-Blake was elected by the council to fill the vacancy left by Dixon's ascension.

Both officials will be called on to lobby behind the scenes in Annapolis this year as the state seeks to fill a structural deficit that could translate into less money flowing in from the state for local programs. They may also need legislative approval for their broader policy initiatives -- such as property tax reform and the land bank -- depending on the course the city takes.

"The voters spoke loud and clear," Rawlings-Blake said after the Board of Estimates meeting. "We need public safety for our present and public education for our future, and those are the things that I'm going to focus on."

At yesterday's meeting, Dixon and Rawlings-Blake voted to approve a tax break that would forgive about \$33 million in taxes for H&S Properties Development Corp., owned by bakery magnate John Paterakis Sr., to construct a waterfront tower and an underground parking garage.

Legg Mason expects to move nearly all of its Baltimore-area employees to the new building, at Fleet and President streets, by 2009. Though the project also includes another tower for a Four Seasons Hotel and condominiums, the tax break, among the largest ever granted by the city, applies only to the office portion and the garage.

The Dixon administration required the developer of the project to offer 50 jobs for city youth -- something the mayor said she intended to do more often on large-scale projects.

Dixon, who is the first woman to be mayor, sits at the head of a government that includes powerful black women in four citywide elected positions. In addition to Dixon and Rawlings-Blake, Joan M. Pratt is the city comptroller and Patricia C. Jessamy is the city state's attorney. Dixon said she believes having a woman in office makes a difference.

"This is a very unique and historical time," she said. "We're able to juggle and wear many hats at one time, and also pay attention to the details. There's a certain sensitivity that we bring that helps us to focus on, yes, the tough issues, but also some of the other softer things that are quality-of-life areas."

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Sun reporter Sumathi Reddy contributed to this article.



City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake sits between Comptroller Joan M. Pratt (far left) and Mayor Sheila Dixon during a Board of Estimates meeting. The meeting was held yesterday morning at City Hall. (Sun photo by Karl Merton Ferron / September 12, 2007)

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